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The end is near for Chemetco plant; Haine calls it a 'sordid chapter in the county's history'

BY WILL BUSS
News-Democrat

Demolition crews on Tuesday had broken the giant tube that once ran atop the former Chemetco Inc. foundry plant apart and were taking it down.

Project managers from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and other public officials watched as giant crane lowered a section of the 250-foot-long and 41,000-pound manifold that had long been the foundry building's most distinctive characteristic.

IEPA remedial project manager Erin Rednour said the demolition had gotten under way, but the manifold's disassembly a most welcoming sign.

"I think visually it will signify to the people in the area that progress is being made," Rednour said. "When they look to the skyline, and those are now gone, I think it will be kind of like a boost to know that progress is being made."

The EPA has been waiting for this day for some time. The Hartford plant was a secondary copper smelting foundry that had operated on 41 acres off Illinois 3 from 1969 to 2001, the year the company went bankrupt. Later that year, the Illinois EPA issued an order to seal the plant.

In 1999, the company was prosecuted for dumping pollutants into nearby Long Lake over the course of a decade via a secret, illegal pipeline. It discharged heavy metals and byproducts into the Mississippi River tributary until it was discovered by state inspectors in 1996.

In January 2000, the company pleaded guilty to conspiracy and to violating the Clean Water Act. Rednour said recent samples from the ground water no longer indicate any further trace of contaminants.

In April 2000, former Chemetco plant manager Bruce W. Hendrickson, of Granite City, and former labor foreman Kevin A. Youngman, of Highland, were each sentenced to probation in connection with a secret pipe that discharged polluted water. Hendrickson, was sentenced to two years of probation with nine months home confinement and Youngman was sentenced to one year of probation with six months home confinement and electronic monitoring. Co-workers George J. Boud Jr., of East Alton, and Gary L. Reed, of Collinsville, were each sentenced to one year of probation with the first six months to be spent in home confinement.

Chemetco was ordered to pay \$3.86 million in fines and to pay for the cleanup was also sued by a number of property owners around Long Lake. However, the company declared bankruptcy on Nov. 13, 2001, two weeks after it closed. On Dec. 7, 2001, the Illinois EPA issued an order to seal Chemetco.

On March 2, 2010, the site was placed on the National Priorities List.

Watching the manifold being taken down, Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton, recalled dealing with the pollution Chemetco produced during his time as the Madison County state's attorney. He said that finally demolishing the former Chemetco plant ends a "sordid chapter in the county's history."

"The plant was never environmentally responsible," Haine said. "It was a corrupt and incompetent act that it was placed here, left to rot and pollute. It's just a disgrace."

Chris Cahnovsky, project manager of demolition for IEPA, said that about 2 feet of iron oxide slag was discovered in the pieces of the manifold, which are more than 12 feet in diameter. The giant tube was constructed to remove and collect dust inside the rusting plant. He said the building is expected to be gone by the end of November.

IEPA spokeswoman Maggie Carson said the building will be stripped for as much scrap metal as it can sell. She said the clean up and remediation will continue for an undetermined period of time.

"It will go on for a while," Carson said. "But I will tell you that the people who have lived around here have had to see this really ugly structure for a long time and are grateful that it is coming down."

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